

FEBRUARY 6

'Diplomacy' as a launch pad for missiles

The current flurry of Western diplomacy will probably turn out to be groundwork for launching missiles at Iran.

Air attacks on targets in Iran are very likely. Yet many antiwar Americans seem eager to believe that won't happen.

Illusion #1: With the U.S. military bogged down in Iraq, the Pentagon is in no position to take on Iran.

But what's on the horizon is not an invasion – it's a major air assault, which the American military can easily inflict on Iranian sites. (And if the task falls to the Israeli military, it is also well-equipped to bomb Iran.)

Illusion #2: The Bush administration is in so much political trouble at home — for reasons including its lies about Iraqi WMDs — that it wouldn't risk an uproar from an attack on Iran.

But the White House has been gradually preparing the domestic political ground for bombing Iran. As the Wall Street Journal reported on Feb. 3, "in recent polls a surprisingly large number of Americans say they would support U.S. military strikes to stop Tehran from getting the bomb."

Above those words, the Journal's headline – "U.S. Chooses Diplomacy on Iran's Nuclear Program" – trumpeted the Bush administration's game plan. It's a time-honored scam: When you're moving toward aggressive military action, emphasize diplomacy.

Donald Rumsfeld proclaimed at a conference in Munich on Feb. 4 that – to put a stop to Iran's nuclear program – the world should work for a "diplomatic solution." Yet the next day, the German daily newspaper Handelsblatt reports, Rumsfeld said in an interview: "All options including the military one are on the table."

Top U.S. officials, inspired by the royal "W," aren't hesitating to speak for the world. Condoleezza Rice said: "The world will not stand by if Iran continues on the path to a

nuclear weapons capability.”

Meanwhile, Rumsfeld declared: “The Iranian regime is today the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism. The world does not want, and must work together to prevent, a nuclear Iran.”

Translation: First we’ll be diplomatic, then we can bomb.

Illusion #3: The U.S. won’t attack Iran because that would infuriate the millions of Iran-allied Shiites in Iraq, greatly damaging the U.S. war effort there.

But projecting rationality onto the Bush administration makes little sense at this point. The people running U.S. foreign policy have their own priorities, and avoiding carnage is not one of them.

Non-proliferation doesn’t rank very high either, judging from Washington’s cozy relationships with the nuclear-weapons powers of Israel, India and Pakistan. Unlike Iran, none of those countries are signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Only Iran has been allowing inspections of its nuclear facilities – and it is Iran that the savants in Washington are now, in effect, threatening to bomb.

With sugar-plum visions of Iran’s massive oil and natural-gas reserves dancing in their heads, the Washington neo-cons evidently harbor some farfetched hopes of bringing about the overthrow of the Iranian regime. But in the real world, an attack on Iran would strengthen its most extreme factions and fortify whatever interest it has in developing nuclear arms.

“The U.S. will not solve the nuclear problem by threatening military strikes or by dragging Iran before the U.N. Security Council,” Iran’s 2003 Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi wrote in the Jan. 19 edition of the Los Angeles Times, in an oped piece co-authored by Muhammad Sahimi, a professor of chemical engineering at the University of Southern California. “Although a vast majority of Iranians despise the country’s hard-liners and wish for their downfall, they also support its nuclear program because it has become a source of pride for an old nation with a glorious history.”

The essay added: “A military attack would only inflame nationalist sentiments. Iran is not Iraq. Given Iranians’ fierce nationalism and the Shiites’ tradition of martyrdom, any military move would provoke a response that would engulf the entire region, resulting in countless deaths and a ruined economy not only for the region but for the world. Imposing U.N. sanctions on Iran would also be counterproductive, prompting Tehran to leave the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its ‘additional protocol.’ Is the world ready to live with such prospects?”

While calling for international pressure against Iran’s serious violations of human

rights, Ebadi and Sahimi said that "Iran is at least six to 10 years away from a nuclear bomb, by most estimates. The crisis is not even a crisis. There is ample time for political reform before Iran ever develops the bomb."

On Feb. 3, the Iranian Student News Agency quoted Iran's former president Muhammad Khatami, who urged the Iranian government to offer assurances that the country's nuclear program is only for generating electricity. "It is necessary to act wisely and with tolerance so that our right to nuclear energy will not be abolished," he said.

Though he failed to develop much political traction for reform during his eight years as president, Khatami was a moderating force against human-rights abuses. His demagogic successor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is a menace to human rights and peace. But it's by no means clear that Ahmadinejad can count on long-term support from the nation's ruling clerics.

The man he defeated in the presidential runoff last summer, former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, wields significant power as head of the government's Expediency Council. Though he has a well-earned reputation as a corrupt opportunist, Rafsanjani is now a beacon of enlightenment compared to Ahmadinejad.

In early January, a pair of Iran scholars – Dariush Zahedi and Ali Ezzatyar, based at the University of California in Berkeley – wrote an LA Times piece making this point: "Contrary to popular belief, the traditional conservative clerical establishment is apprehensive about the possibility of violence inside and outside Iran. It generally opposes an aggressive foreign policy and, having some intimate ties with Iran's dependent capitalist class, is appalled at the rapid slide of the economy since Ahmadinejad's inauguration. The value of Tehran's stock market has plunged \$10 billion, the nation's vibrant real estate market has withered and capital outflows are increasing."

And the scholars added pointedly: "The history of U.S.-Iran relations shows that the more Washington chastises Tehran for its nuclear ambitions, the more it plays into the hands of the radicals by riling up fear and nationalist sentiment."

Right now, the presidents of Iran and the United States are thriving on the belligerency of the other. From all indications, a military assault on Iran would boost Ahmadinejad's power at home. And it's a good bet that the U.S. government will do him this enormous favor.

Unless we can prevent it.

Norman Solomon's latest book is "War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death." For information, go to: www.WarMadeEasy.com